

An Overview of the Berber Jews of Morocco

By Shelomo Alfassa

Much like the Iberian Peninsula, a characteristic element of the early history of North Africa was the successive waves of different inhabitants which introduced themselves across the Maghreb. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Muslims, Jews, and Christians all occupied or co-occupied the region at one point or another. One of these unique ethnic groups is known as the *Berbers*.

The Berbers have been recognized as one of the indigenous tribal groups of “White” Africa that call themselves “Imazighen” (noblemen), that use their own language.¹ They made up about 45% of the population of Morocco and 30% of the population of Algeria.²

The Jews have been a wandering people, “they have penetrated already into every state, so that it is difficult to find a single place in the world in which their tribe has not been received...” said the pre-Christian geographer Strabo in the 1st century BCE.³ The Jews probably first arrived in North Africa at the time when the Greeks set up *emporiums* (trade centers) in Iberia.⁴ This may be as early as the period as early as 800-700 BCE.⁵ There is, however, conclusive evidence to demonstrate that Berber-Jewish history goes back to at least the 5th century CE.

Among these Hellenistic city-states, it is known Jews made up a considerable portion of the population.⁶ More than one account from ancient documents demonstrate that Jews worked within the Hellenistic world as financiers, artisans, and weavers. Some were known to be farmers who tended their fields with the sweat of their brow,⁷ or metalsmiths who fabricated tools or may have smelted ore which helped fill the coffers of the Hellenists.⁸ Along with the driving forces behind the earlier Phoenician and subsequent Greek settlements in North Africa were economic expansion and the obsession for gold, iron, copper, and tin. Under the Romans, Judaism was a *religio licita*, a licensed religion that was legal throughout the Empire. Because of this, migrations toward the newly expanding colonies of Africa was in all probability very frequent. We do know that in 70

¹ Gerson-Kiwi p.16

² Gerson-Kiwi, Edith. "Migrating Patterns of Melody among the Berbers and Jews of the Atlas Mountains." Journal of the International Folk Music Council: 1967. p.16

³ Bentwich, *Moments in Judaism*, 33

⁴ Finley, *Early Greece*, 94

⁵ Tandy, 72

⁶ Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome*, 281; Williams, 48

⁷ On slaves in Greek agriculture see Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 505f; and M.H.Jameson, “Agriculture and slavery in classical Athens.” in *Classical Journal*, 73 (1977, 8), 122-45

⁸ Williams, 19-26

CE while many of the Jerusalem survivors fled to Babylonia, a significant number of the Jews sought refuge in North Africa.⁹

In the 7th century, an important addition to the Jewish population was made by Spanish immigrants, who, fleeing from the persecutions of the Visigoths, escaped to Mauritania in Africa, and settled in the Byzantine cities. Whether they mingled with the Berber population, making converts among them, is an open question, to which, however, Arab historians indicate they did. Nonetheless, we know that even before the arrive of the Muslims in North Africa, the Berbers and the Jews had been intermingling and with this came the inevitable conversions of Berbers to Judaism and Jews to Islam.¹⁰ The question on the origins of the Berber Jews is also further complicated by the likelihood of intermarriage. Professor Paul Wexler in his somewhat controversial book, *The Non-Jewish Origins of the Sephardic Jews* says that close Berber-Jewish links in Spain also provided an environment which might have been conducive to Berber conversion to Judaism.¹¹

The Berber Jews have a legend about a Jewish princess that was the head of a tribe known as *Kahinah*; they lived in the second half of the seventh century. According to Islamic historians, this was the most powerful tribe at the time of the Arab invasion of the Maghreb, which extended its domination over nearly all the Berbers. It was said to have occupied Mount Aures (Atlas) and was governed by Princess Kahinah Dahiyah, who covered herself with glory in her fight against the invading Islamic army. She defeated the Arabian general and compelled the Arabs to withdraw. When, five years later (694 CE), the Arabs received a large reinforcement, and advanced against the Berbers, Kahinah ordered all the Berber cities to be destroyed, hoping that the Arabs would then renounce fighting for the conquest of a wasteland. But they persisted in their attack; and the princess died near a well which, in memory of the heroine, is still named after her.¹²

As of 1857, there was a Jewish Berber tribe known as the Daggatun, whose members were “very numerous and spread over the whole desert,” although residing chiefly among the Tuaregs in the oasis of Ajaj.¹³ According to their own traditions, these Daggatun have lived in the Sahara since the end of the 7th century CE, when they were driven out of Tementit, their early home and the former capital of the Jewish Berbers, because they would not accept Islam. “There seems to be little doubt that Jewish blood has largely been mixed with that of the Berbers living in the Moroccan and Algerian Sahara. In fact,

⁹ Laskier, *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 8

¹⁰ Gerson-Kiwi pp.17-18

¹¹ State Univ. of NY: Albany, 1996. p. 40.

¹² *Jewish Encyclopedia*

¹³ *Jewish Encyclopedia*

the Berbers are said to have been at one time Jews;”¹⁴ according to another tradition, they are descended from the Philistines driven out of Canaan.¹⁵ The *Jewish Encyclopedia* says:

Indefinite and fabulous traditions concerning such early settlements have been handed down among the Berber Jews of the Atlas and Rif mountains, the district of Sus, and the oasis of Tafilet and many other oases of the western regions. These Jews may be regarded as the descendants of those early settlers. The Jewish colonists of Borion assign their first settlement in the country to the time of Solomon, claiming that he himself built their synagogue, which in the sixth century was transformed into a church. A historian that traveled through the Atlas region and became acquainted with the Jews there, says they claim that their ancestors all left Jerusalem before its destruction and did not go as exiles to Babylon.

The indigenous Berber population is one of the various populations that have contributed to the present-day gene pool of Morocco. This also includes the Phoenicians, Sephardic Jews, Bedouin Arabs and sub-Saharan Africans. It is interesting to note that a study that was conducted sought to complete a genetic description of the Berber-speaking population in the Souss region (one of the country’s most fertile regions) in southern Morocco, based on mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) analysis.¹⁶ Thirty-four different DNA sequences were found among the sample population; an estimated 68% of the sequences occurred [came from] throughout Europe, West Asia and North Africa, 26% originated in sub-Saharan Africa, and 6% belonged to the North African specific haplogroup—a Gene marker used to define genetic populations. The Souss Valley mtDNA sequences indicated the presence of two populations which expanded at different times: the West Eurasian sequences in the Souss sample had a smaller average number of pairwise differences than pairs of sub-Saharan sequences. The conclusions indicated the possible geographic origin of each sequence facilitated an interpretation of both internal diversity parameters and between-population relationships. The sub-Saharan admixture in the Souss Valley matched the south-north cline of sub-Saharan influence in North Africa, also evident in the genetic distances of North African populations to Europeans and sub-Saharan Africans.

¹⁴ Jew. Quart. Rev." iv. 375

¹⁵ *Jewish Encyclopedia*

¹⁶ Brakez Z., et al. “Human mitochondrial DNA sequence variation in the Moroccan population of the Souss area.” *Annals of Human Biology*. 2001 May-Jun; 28(3): 295-307 U.K.

In another study,¹⁷ a total of 553 Y-chromosomes were analyzed from mainland Portugal and the North Atlantic Archipelagos of Acores and Madeira, in order to characterize the genetic composition of their male gene pool. A large majority (78-83% of each population) of the male lineages could be classified as belonging to three basic Y chromosomal groups. In addition, a certain genetic marker accounted for more than half of the lineages in any of the Portuguese sub-populations, and is a characteristic marker of many different West European populations that are typical of the circum-Mediterranean region or even East Africa. The highly diverse genetic markers in Portuguese people likely combines indicators that the ancestry of these people are of distinct origins. The present composition of the Y chromosomes that can be found in Portugal...likely reflects a pre-Arab component shared with North African populations or testifies, at least in part, to the influence of Sephardic Jews. In contrast to the marginally low sub-Saharan African Y chromosome component in Portuguese, such lineages have been detected at a moderately high frequency in our previous survey of mtDNA from the same samples, indicating the presence of sex-related gene flow, most likely mediated by the Atlantic slave trade.

According to a Moroccan census of 1936, 3/4th of Morocco's 161,000 Jews were bilingual in Berber and Arabic, and another 25,000 were exclusively Berber speakers.¹⁸ Most of the speakers of only one language, Judeo-Arabic, may have disappeared near 1930,¹⁹ as French was becoming the common language.²⁰ After 1948, particularly after the fallout of the founding of the State of Israel, most Berber Jews immigrated to Israel. Some 2,000 of them, all elderly, still speak Judeo-Berber. These Jews formally lived in the High Atlas mountain range, Tifnut, and other communities.²¹

Today, the Berber Jews, along with the Sephardim and Ashkenazim, make up the three ethnic groups of Jews remaining in Morocco, a country which is said to have less than 6,000 Jews, with 5,000 of them living in Casablanca.²²

¹⁷ Goncalves R. et al., "Y-chromosome lineages from Portugal, Madeira and Acores record elements of Sephardim and Berber ancestry." *Annals of Human Genetics* 2005 Jul;69 (Pt 4):443-54. U.K.

¹⁸ Maddy-Weitzman, Bruce. "Jews and Berbers." The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. pp.1-2

¹⁹ Gordon, Raymond G., Jr. (ed.), 2005. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Fifteenth edition. Dallas, Tex.: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com/>.

²⁰ Sussman, Sarah. "Jewish Population of French North Africa." Stanford Univ. Article on the Website of the USHMM. www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007310

²¹ Gordon. n.p.

²² Council of Moroccan Jewish Communities, Rabat